

# **Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**

## **Special Enforcement Area**

### **Media Release**

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#### **NATURE OF RELEASE:**

**Crawfish Sport Season and Law Enforcement Statistics**

#### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

During this year's crawfish sport season the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation implemented a two-phase plan to address concerns traditionally associated with this high activity event. Phase I occurred the weekend prior to the sport season, July 26 through 28th. The plan consisted of utilizing numerous plain-clothes officers in unmarked units for the purpose of detecting resource and boating safety violations. 23 FWC officers from all over the state, which included 17 investigators, 3 pilots, 2 K-9 units, and one senior staff member, joined local FWC officers during Phase I. Local assets included 28 FWC officers, 16 National Marine Sanctuary officers, 4 investigators, and 1 pilot, for a total of 67 FWC officers utilized. Plain-clothes officers and pilots detecting potential violations called in uniformed officers to conduct investigations and make arrests when warranted. In addition, K-9 units trained to detect crawfish were utilized to search and locate contraband crawfish.

Phase II occurred during the sport season, July 30 and 31, and consisted of high visibility patrols with marked units and uniformed officers in main exit and entry points of high vessel traffic. During this phase, 17 new visiting FWC officers, 5 pilots, and 3 K-9 units, were utilized in addition to the 49 local FWC and Sanctuary officers.

As in years past, FWC and National Marine Sanctuary hosted an information booth at the north end of Key Largo in an effort to provide information to the vast numbers of visitors and radio public service announcements, local question and answer sessions, and publications in local newspapers were also done in an effort to bring information to the public. FWC also enlisted the assistance of over 50 volunteers Keys wide at boat ramps, marinas, and other highly visited areas to distribute brochures about the current

and new lobster rules that are effective during the upcoming regular recreational crawfish season, August 6, 2003. Multiple agency participation included Monroe County Sheriff's Office, Florida Highway Patrol, U. S. Coast Guard, Everglades National Park, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Key West Police Department, Key Colony Beach Police Department, United States Customs, and Florida Park Patrol. FWC Colonel Julie Jones and FWC Commissioner Rodney Barreto also participated by patrolling with local officers to note enforcement issues and common violations that are encountered by officers in the field.

The general consensus of officers in the field indicate that this year's attendance in the crawfish sport season was lower than in past years. However, numerous crawfish violations were detected during Phase I and Phase II enforcement details. Some notable cases during Phase I utilizing covert tactics, K-9, and marked units with uniformed officers follow:

At Channel Five Bridge, Investigators Charlie Chafin, Ed Cates, and FWC Officer Robert Dube issued 20 misdemeanor citations to 5 Hialeah residents who were spearing crawfish. They were charged with possession of 33 crawfish out of season, possession of 31 wrung tails on the water, and possession of speared crawfish. Officer John Snow's K-9 "Moose" alerted on wrung tails hidden inside a woman's purse, and an additional charge of interference was added to the list of offenses. One of the subjects was also arrested for an active warrant from Arizona for drug possession charges. Extradition was confirmed with a \$100,000. bond amount.

At Card Sound Bridge 20 citations were issued to four Miami residents, two adults, and two juveniles for possession of multiple speared species including angelfish, undersize hogfish, parrotfish, and undersize crawfish. Investigator Chuck Collins, observed the four divers for approximately one hour, while Lieutenant Harry Parker, was able to snorkel close to the divers. During their surveillance Sanctuary Lieutenant David Roudebush and Officer Scott Larosa arrived in a marked Sanctuary patrol vessel and assisted in making the arrest. The individuals were also cited for harvesting crawfish within the Biscayne Lobster Sanctuary.

At the Angler's Club in Ocean Reef, Investigator Chuck Collins observed a Miami man loading a Kayak into a vehicle and inside the vehicle was a gigging device. During his investigation he discovered speared, wrung, undersize crawfish concealed inside a t-shirt 3 to 4 feet in front of the man's vehicle. The

man was cited for possession of crawfish out of season and possession of one undersize crawfish.

At Stock Island, Lieutenant Roy Payne, Officers Larry Jernstedt and Michael Adriano, in an unmarked vessel, observed two divers without a divers down flag in the Safe Harbor Channel. Shortly afterward, the divers exited the water, tossed their spear gun and dive gear into a marked City Electric vehicle, and headed toward the building. Their wet foot print trail led right to the security entrance of the utility building where the officers had no access. The officers went back to the location where the divers were seen and dove up one fresh crawfish head with puncture marks. When the subjects exited the building the officers confronted them. Building managers and supervisors were very cooperative and gave FWC officers consent to search inside the building. FWC Officer John Snow and K-9, Moose, conducted a search and Moose alerted to the presence of crawfish in the break room area. At the same time, the subjects confessed they had hidden crawfish in the break room and the officers located the crawfish above the ceiling tiles. The subjects were cited for possession of crawfish out of season, undersize tails, and speared crawfish.

At Newfound Harbor, Officer Andy Zamonis while on water patrol in a marked unit observed two Big Pine residents diving without a divers down flag displayed. The officer inspected their catch and discovered 21 wrung tails. One of the fishermen did not have any identification and the officer followed the subjects back to their where they consented to a search inside their house. The officer immediately noticed a large cooler on the kitchen counter and discovered 28 fresh crawfish tails inside. At first, the woman told the officer the tails were from last year, but later recanted and admitted she and her husband harvested the crawfish that morning. The officer issued 6 citations for possession of 49 crawfish out of season, 49 wrung tails, and 19 undersize crawfish. He also issued a warning for failure to display a divers down flag.

During Phase II, July 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, large numbers of enforcement efforts were dedicated to the Lower Keys, although no major violations were detected. One notable incident began when FWC received information from undercover Monroe County deputies who saw five subjects shuttling bags of crawfish from their vessel to their hotel room in Grassy Key. When the deputies identified themselves, the subjects ran into their room and attempted to conceal the crawfish inside dresser drawers. FWC Captain Pat Langley and Officer Jason Reiff arrived and were given consent to enter the room. After several creative

stories, the five firefighters from Palm Beach County confessed to making multiple trips throughout the day. All five were cited for possession of 92 crawfish over the recreational bag limit.

In Key West, Officers Gordon Sharp and Jeremy Huff cited numerous individuals from Sarasota, Key West, Little Torch, and Miami Lakes for various violations crawfish violations. Three out of state subjects caught multi tripping were 12 crawfish over the bag limit, but claimed the fourth diver was no longer on board with them. As a result of their investigation, two subjects were each cited for possession of 6 over the bag limit of crawfish. In Jewfish Basin, Sanctuary Officers Liz McCoy and David Dipre cited a local Key West resident for possession of 3 undersize crawfish. The next day they issued three federal citations to residents of Honolulu and West Palm Beach for harvesting 18 crawfish within the Western Sambo's Sanctuary Protected Area. North end Sanctuary Officer also made numerous cases inside Sanctuary Protected Areas and inside Biscayne Lobster Sanctuary for crawfish violations.

At Little Palm Island, Officers Martin Messier, Christian Mathisen and Sanctuary Officers Rama Shuster and Marc Suckell responded to a vessel hit and run. Well after nightfall, a Big Pine man operating a 29' aluminum vessel struck a 65' sailing vessel chartered by the Boy Scouts of America. The vessel fled into the darkness but was soon reported aground by witnesses at Little Palm Island. When the officers arrived, the vessel had freed itself and the occupants were attempting to secure to the docks at Little Palm. A physical encounter ensued when the operator of the fleeing vessel refused to comply with the officer's commands to keep his hands away from a dive knife that was strapped to the suspect's leg. The man was arrested on two criminal charges, leaving the scene of an accident, violation of a navigation rule resulting in an accident. A fisheries inspection also resulted in two additional criminal charges of possession of egg bearing crawfish and under size crawfish.

On Summerland Key, the following day, Officer Messier arrested a local juvenile for resisting arrest with violence, when the juvenile suddenly became verbally abusive and physically resisted arrest. The encounter began when the juvenile, along with two other friends, were observed diving without displaying a diver's down flag. The group was found to be in possession of undersize crawfish and the officer intended to educate the group of youngsters

and release them with a verbal warning just prior to the physical altercation.

In addition to the focus on crawfish enforcement and other resource protection, boating safety violations, failure to display divers down flag, and failure to possess a Florida Saltwater Fishing License with crawfish endorsement composed a majority of the enforcement and educational issues.

This year, during the crawfish sport season, there were fewer vessel inspections and users checked than last year. Last year 3,518 vessel inspections and 12,621 users were checked and this year 2,972 vessel inspections occurred with 10,036 users checked even though the documented activity for this year included the Monday, Tuesday, and Friday preceding and following actual sport days. Activity documented by officers is also less than last year. Last year's documented activity includes the Tuesday preceding crawfish sport season but not the Friday following sport season. Also notable is the number of boating accidents reported this year during sport season was 23 and only 1 from last year, and during Phase I, pre-season detail, 15 boating accidents were reported.

Although none of the boating accidents involved fatalities or major property damage the increase in reported boating accidents was significantly higher than last year. The following overall statistics of FWC activity are provided for comparison:

This year during Phase II, July 28 through August 1, 2003, FWC documented 109 resource citations, 19 other citations, 87 Uniform Boating Citations, 356 boating safety warnings, 234 resource warnings, 27 other warnings, 3 BUI arrests, 90 calls for service, 4 search and rescue missions, and 23 boating accidents. A total of 896 water patrol hours were conducted with 677.5 hours dedicated to boating safety. Total overtime utilized was 829.25 hours.

Last year's statistics from July 22 through July 25, 2002, documented 228 resource citations, 31 other citations, 64 Uniform Boating Citations, 216 boating safety warnings, 269 resource warnings, 71 other warnings, 1 BUI arrest, 157 calls for service, 16 search and rescue missions, and 1 boating accident. A total of 621 water patrol hours were conducted with 672.5 dedicated to boating safety. Total overtime hours utilized was 713 hours.

Statistics for the Phase I, pre-season enforcement effort between July 24<sup>th</sup> through 28<sup>th</sup> are as follows: 1,015 vessel inspections and 3,884 users checked resulted in 37 Uniform Boating Citations, 137 resource citations, 20 other citations, 97 boating safety warnings, 136 resource warnings, 25 other warnings,

1 BUI arrest, 107 calls for service, 3 search and rescue missions, and 15 boating accidents. A total of 626.5 water patrol hours were conducted with 310 hours dedicated to boating safety. Total overtime hours utilized was 992 hours.

It is apparent that the activity documented through numbers of arrests, citations, warnings is less than those reported last year; however, since FWC focused patrol and enforcement efforts in the Lower Keys this year, these numbers might simply reflect that reportable activity in the Lower Keys is less than reportable activity that occurred in the Middle Keys last year. In the past, FWC has typically experienced much lower numbers of visitors to the Lower Keys than the number of visitors that visit the Upper Keys during the crawfish sport season. Although there are a number of conjectures as to why the statistics reflect less documented activity, what is apparent to many of the officers is that the rule changes are getting out to the public. This was evident by the number of sportsmen who demonstrated they were well informed and abiding by the rules and by the types of questions being asked by the public. The decreased numbers might also indicate the positive effect of cumulative years of enforcement and educational efforts made by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Law Enforcement.

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